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Challenges and Pathways to Empowerment: A Study of Women District Development Council (DDC) Members of the Jammu Division

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ABSTRACT

Panchayati Raj institutions are fundamental for democracy to thrive in our country. They have provided a new perspective to rural development, social justice and empowerment of the marginalised communities. The meaningful performance of these bodies would be based on active participation and contribution of its citizens-both male and female. Women's engagement in the democratic process is dreadfully low at all levels-local, state and national. Making sure women have equal access to political processes and decision-making, authority is a key component of social justice for woman. The goal is to establish a society in which women can actively participate in their communities, have their rights upheld and have their views heard. There was a need of significant involvement from the central government because the Panchayati Raj institutions in the former state of Jammu and Kashmir still had structural and operational flaws. Hence, a new body called as District Development Council (DDC) was first introduced by the Ministry of Home Affairs on 16 October 2020 that led towards complete

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adoption of 73rd constitutional amendment in J&K. It aimed at bringing in more democracy at the local governance level and make its members more accountable to the people of Jammu and Kashmir. This paper is based on the qualitative research wherein the data is collected from the women DDC members of the Jammu division through field visits that is utilized in writing case studies and narratives. It also covers relevant secondary sources which include analysis of government reports, policy documents and academic literature. The present paper utilizes the Pluralist perspective which maintains that power is dispersed among a variety of groups in society as most of the members are not directly involved in the political arena but their interests are represented by a relatively small number of leaders who actively participate in the political struggle. The paper attempts to explore the role of women DDC members to better understand their role in local bodies vis-à-vis promote social justice and women empowerment. Besides, this paper is an addition in the domain of political sociology in general and local governance in India in specific.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj, Social Justice, District Development Councils, Democracy, Women empowerment, Jammu and Kashmir.

Introduction

Rural local governance is commonly known as the Panchayati Raj institution. It is an important tool for extending the democratic process at the grassroot levels and involving local communities in decision-making over issues pertaining to their fundamental civic demands. As the government in developing nation have worked to address the basic needs of the impoverished and establish socially equitable patterns of economic growth, rural local governance has grown in importance as a policy goal. The modern state's growing quantity and complexity of functions have made rural local governance a crucial component of how government services are organized.

Women constitute approximately 49.73 % of the world's total population but they are poorly given representation in political offices. United Nations' document titled 'Women' points out that women's increased participation in mass politics has remained concentrated in the lower echelons of power structure and has not been matched by the same presence at the higher levels of decision making. Women must have political representation in rural local governance in order to advance gender equality and fortify democracy. This has observable political and financial advantages as well. The need for more women in politics in general and local governance in specific has been emphasized in numerous studies, which may ultimately result in good

governance, reduced corruption, fewer conflicts and more developmental advancement.

Rural local governance entails rearranging the social power structure. Indian democracy's performance in the first forty years following independence made it abundantly evident that women were not actively involved at the local level. Developmental initiatives pertaining to public health, education, water and sanitation, environment etc. have suffered as a result. Decentralisation will only lead to effective local administration if social capital is high, women are actively engaged in local politics and local budgets are given to suit the needs of both rural and urban citizens. (Joshi, 2017)

Through, Sabha and Samiti, the concept of local self-governance has existed in India since the Vedic era. The creation of a system of local governance throughout the Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods also institutionalized village management. An intricate system of local governance was detailed in Kautilya's 'Arthashastra'. All monarchs during Gupta era prioritized public welfare and local welfare. Similarly, during Delhi Sultanate and Mughal periods, village councils continued to be responsible for settling local disputes. However, in the local bodies of that women, lower castes and landless were not represented. (Alok, 2011)

However, during the British rule, Lord Ripon was the initiator of local self- governance in 1882 in India. He attempted to manage the local affairs through this system. When the British government sought to allow some measure of decentralisation through the principle of 'dyarchy,' women were not considered ineligible for either acting as representatives or as voters. (Bajpai, 1977)

In terms of Panchayati Raj, Jammu and Kashmir has a distinct history. Maharaja Hari Singh's government promulgated the J&K Village Panchayat Regulation Act No. 1 in 1935. Prior to the nationwide implementation of the Panchayati Raj system, J&K looked forward by enacting the 'Jammu and Kashmir Village Panchayat Act of 1958' by repealing its earlier acts. The Panchayats as local institutions of self-government remained dysfunctional over a longer period. The erstwhile J&K state government took a step of 'single line administration to ensure the people's involvement in the development process through their representatives. (Kumar, 2014)

The adoption of this novel paradigm sparked a grassroots movement towards self-governance in order to establish a robust democratic framework. The introduction of the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989, resulted from this insight. But there was no provision of women representation in the Halqa Panchayats till 2003. However, Jammu and Kashmir act, 2003 talked

Challenges and Pathways to Empowerment: A Study of Women District Development...

about 33% reservation for women in Halqa Panchayats yet there was no reservation of seat for the post of Sarpanch. (Kumar, 2014)

In Jammu & Kashmir, the Panchayati Raj institutions had to deal with both operational and structural difficulties. While the act mandated a three tier system of panchayats, the government was not required to establish the Block Development Councils (BDCs), and District Planning and Development Board (DPDB) when holding elections for the Halqa Panchayats. Consequently, BDCs and DPDBs were not formed between 2001 and 2006. Operationally, the main issue was the lack of authority granted to the panchayats. Although Halqa panchayats were democratically elected during 2001-2006 period and again after 2011 elections, they remained without real empowerment. The panchayats were not provided any funds from the state government but they were made dependent on funds from the centrally sponsored schemes. Even the powers of Halqa Majilis (Gram Sabha) were not described properly. Gram Sabha which should have been the body demanding accountability from Panch and Sarpanch, was made subordinate to the Panchayats. (Kumar, 2014)

The presence of terrorism and separatist boycott, lack of resources coupled with lack of public knowledge, and state and administrative control over the operations and authority of Panchayati Raj institutions, corruption in panchayats, lack of security to elected panches, non-implementation of 73rd constitutional amendment and delay in panchayat elections were the main challenges faced by the local bodies. (Hussain & Ahmed, 2018) Thus, there was the demand of serious intervention from the central government towards complete adoption of 73rd constitutional amendment in this regard in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Therefore, on October 16, 2020, fourteen months after Jammu and Kashmir's special status was revoked, the Ministry of Home Affairs first established the District Development Councils (DDC). In November 2020, government of India decided to hold elections to the District Development Councils to bring in more democracy at the Panchayat level and make its members more answerable to the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

The central government's goal in establishing this new framework is to establish an elected third tier of Panchayati Raj institution, signifying the full implementation of the previously repealed 73rd amendment act in the Jammu and Kashmir. The District Development Council works in the district for the term of five years until new DDC elections are announced or held.

The present paper has attempted to analyze whether local governance is providing greater transparency, responsiveness, and opportunities to women representatives of local bodies in the Jammu division.

Review of Literature

Concept of Local Self-governance

Every local self-government must be committed for strengthening participatory democracy at the grassroots level. Local self-government would be a long way off without distributing functions, functionaries, and funds. The day is not far when these self-governing institutions would prove their best contribution and sustainability fully supported by their makers and shakers. (Lakshmi, 2022)

The principal aim of instituting a three-tier local governance structure is to enhance democratic engagement, improve the expression of local requirements, guarantee effective utilization of local assets and augment accountability and transparency. (Singh & Meenu, 2022) For example, the district level Zilla Parishad has been instrumental in advancing a number of the central and state governments' key programmes. The present paper has explored as how women DDC members have articulated local needs of the Jammu division and ensured transparency in their functioning.

Concept of Participation

It includes the various volunteer endeavors that people of a society engage in to influence decisions concerning the evolution of administration at various governmental levels. The antonym of 'participation' is 'apathy' that refers to people's withdrawal from or their indifference towards associating themselves voluntarily and actively with developmental activities. Several scholars define participation as activities that citizens engage in to participate in the governance system. This taking part refers to action at any level from macro to micro and from advisory role to an intensive involvement in the policy and decision process. (Arora & Hooja, 2009) This paper has looked into the participation of women DDC members in public domain.

Decentralised and participative government are based on the principle of empowering the people to take charge of their own destiny and guarantee their involvement in the process of making decisions. Involving the public in the decision making process not only promotes better local problem solving but also improves the execution of local choices as well as government program and policies. Women's reservation may play a significant role in encouraging women to participate in Panchayat politics, but they do not ensure that elected women would do so. (Arora & Hooja, 2009)

Panchayati Raj institutions have ensured rural development of the society via rural health & safety, improved income, infrastructure development, better delivery system etc. and it has also strengthened the democratic position in

the society. Three decades after the constitutional amendments (1992-2021), the local bodies are regarded as a key mechanism in supporting the process of decentralisation in India. Its functions and responsibilities have been legitimated by the Indian constitution and have covered all the three areas: political, administrative, and financial decentralisation. (Ramya, 2014)

Challenges and Constraints Faced by Women DDC Members

There were issues in local bodies ranging from errors of omission and commission to corruption, susceptibility of social biases, poorly resourced panchayats, absence of quality human capital etc. Local bodies have many a time failed to encourage participation of women and have been neither representative nor spontaneous along with elite capturing local governments. The theoretical framework of empowerment in this research emphasizes upon women's subordination and is interpreted as a shift from helplessness to power and the recognition of women's contributions.

This paper has examined whether the new level of democratic decentralization has empowered women DDC members while carrying out their responsibilities. It has also studied the challenges faced by the women DDC members while performance of their duties.

Research Methodology

Theoretical Perspective

This research paper is qualitative in nature. Such studies are typically conducted through case studies and narratives. This paper has followed the pluralist perspective which maintains that power is dispersed among a variety of groups in society. Pluralism is a theory which claims to explain the nature and distribution of power in Western democratic societies. Whereas elite theory and Marxism argue that power is concentrated in the hands of dominant minority, the pluralist perspective maintains that power is dispersed among a variety of groups in the society.

In his widely read book, *Who Governs*, (Dahl, 2005) Robert Dahl emphasized the need of understanding the qualifications of individuals who set policy. The study came to the conclusion that a number of social groupings representing a range of competing interests are dispersed across society. Positive policy formulations for the benefit of citizens are ultimately the result of power struggle over how to determine policy outcomes and the ways in which various political parties, their representatives and interest groups stake their claims. Divergent interests vying for dominance support both positive policy articulation and democratic balance.

From the pluralist perspective most members of the society are not directly

involved in the political arena but their interests are represented by a relatively small number of leaders who actively participate in the political struggle. For example, these District Development Councils are elected local governing bodies at the district level whose members are directly elected by the people of Jammu and Kashmir. These leaders are often referred as elites and pluralist perspective is sometimes called as elite pluralism. Power is seen to be dispersed among plurality of elites who actively compete with one another to further particular interests.

In *The Power Structure*, (Rose, 1997) Arnold M. Rose conceives of society as consisting of several elites, each relatively small numerically and working in distinct realms of existence. Among the elites are several that have their power through economic controls, several others have power through political controls and still other have power through military, associational, religious, knowledge and other controls. Through this multiplicity of relatively independent elites, the major interests in society are represented.

Role and Responsibilities vis-à-vis Challenges of Women DDC Members of the Jammu Division

The elected DDC women members have begun to participate in the rural local governance where opinions and observations regarding women's proxy membership have been liberally provided. Women members' experiences in the DDC meetings, their successes and disappointments along with the factors that worked for or against them are reflected in in-depth case-studies. The narratives and experiences expressed in these case studies highlight plethora of change taking place among women.

Their experience in DDC have changed many of them. The elements of this transformation include self-confidence, empowerment, political awareness and positive mindset. For this reason, the involvement of female representatives has been examined based on their narratives and case-studies. Out of the many case studies done for the purpose of research, two of the following case studies are being presented here for illustrating the experiences and participation of women DDC members.

Case Study 1

Sharda Bhau, 55 years old is a District Development Council (DDC) member from Akhnoor district of the Jammu division. Popularly called as 'Veer-Naari' she was married at an early age to late Hawaldar Daler Singh Bahu who was martyred in the Kargil war of 1999. Presently Sharda Bahu lives with her son and daughter-in-law in Jammu city but originally hails from the Platan village of Akhnoor. Platan is a border village situated approximately 2 km away from International Border (IB), 32 km away from sub-district

Challenges and Pathways to Empowerment: A Study of Women District Development...

headquarter Akhnoor and 60 km away from district headquarter Jammu. According to 2011 census, the literacy rate in Platan is 72.9% with male literacy rate at 77.84% and female literacy rate is 67.81%

Sharda migrated to Akhnoor as they faced shelling due to close proximity with Pakistan border. Her constituency which include Jourian and other 20 panchayat villages are mostly border-dwelling areas. She regularly visits these areas for conducting official visits, meetings with general public and for other DDC related work.

Sharda is a housewife and belongs to the zamindar family. She had no political experience and was elected for the first time to the office of DDC member with the highest votes in her favour. "I contested elections for the first time in my life and got elected with majority votes not because of money or muscle factor but out of pure honesty and the good image of my deceased husband who was martyred for this nation."

Sharda admitted that she did not wanted to contest elections for power but her only aim is to serve society with the best of her potential. "No one in my family was in politics. They saw my integrity and commitment towards the public because of which I was chosen to serve my people. I was motivated to contest elections by my community. While contesting elections of DDC there were no major challenges from any side- people or administration. It is because I am a well-respected "Veer Naari."

Sharda Bhau accepted her overall status has enhanced as there is positive change in her attitude towards family, education, marriage etc. Sharda Bhau is well connected with one of the national level political party. She has complete awareness about the roles and responsibilities of DDC and attends its regular meetings. Along with that she weekly visits 20 Panchayats her jurisdiction for supervising developmental works.

Sharda Bhau disclosed that she has received an annual grant of rupees 72 lakh for implementation of rural developmental work and other government schemes under the DDC plan. She has completed work in her Panchayats which include construction of lanes and by-lanes, repair of dilapidated rural roads, tile work of lanes, electrification of villages with department of JKPDD.

Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) is to assist, empower and facilitate states and UTs in planning of participatory rural water supply strategy for ensuring potable drinking water security on long term basis to every rural household and public institution. "Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) is a central scheme implemented under our supervision in several villages of Akhnoor. I personally visited many villages to ensure Har Ghar Nal, Jal Yojana." DDC member Sharda Bhau claims to have good relationship with administration too as she

understands the proximity between administration and political leaders for the overall public welfare.

Women of her area have high expectations from her and is assured about fulfilling their expectations. "I lost my first son after his marriage. But I decided to remarry my daughter-in-law with my second son and ensured she completed her graduation and post-graduation after marriage," said Sharda. Women look up to her as a role-model and approach her with their problems like domestic violence, family conflicts and other issues. "I try to resolve their problems by discussing the problems directly with their family members."

She acknowledged that special efforts are made to resolve women related issues. "I have arranged health camps especially for the rural women of my Panchayats. These days there has been a drastic increase in the number of Cancer cases in our Jammu and Kashmir. So the people, especially rural women are concerned but not fully aware about the prevention, symptoms or early diagnosis of this disease. Moreover, our rural women do not discuss it openly due to fear and stigma attached with the said disease. Hence ladies from my area shared the growing health concerns with me and I have arranged special health awareness drives regarding breast cancer and cervical cancer by coordinating and requesting officials of our health department."

Sharda Bhau is an aspirational woman who said that the newly formed DDC has given real meaning to the democracy. The UT government of Jammu and Kashmir with MLA's has come into power in 2024 but we were there before them addressing the needs of the people at the local level and providing solutions to their grievances, said DDC member from Akhnoor.

Case Study 2

Surekha Bhagat, is a 32-year-old Scheduled Caste DDC member from Arnia area of Jammu division. She is educated up to twelfth grade and is an unmarried woman. She belonged to lower middle class family and has about two acres of land that they cultivate. Surekha is a politically active worker of a national level political party and got elected to the post of DDC member by contesting elections as party candidate.

In DDC elections she was supported by family and community members and was the only Scheduled Caste candidate in the fray and thus won comfortably. Surekha has 18 panchayats under her supervision as DDC member and conducts weekly door-to-door visits in her areas. She raises issues independently in the DDC meetings, asserts her viewpoints and works by taking administration, Sarpanch, BDCs and DDC members into confidence.

However, Surekha Bhagat pointed out certain challenges that she as woman DDC member had to face. Initially, people in villages were not aware

about DDC. All they knew was Sarpanch. They had no idea that a DDC member was superior to a Sarpanch and had more powers or budget than a Sarpanch. "People knew that I have become DDC member but they somehow preferred meeting with Sarpanch. It is when we awared them about our roles and responsibilities they realized our power."

Secondly, Surekha shared that being a female DDC member has definitely raised her socio-economic status in family, neighbourhood, caste and in public but there are some constraints in the performance of her role. "I am a DDC member. In order of rank, my status is higher to the rank of Deputy Commissioner but in reality I as DDC member get a meagre salary of rupees fifteen thousand per month with no security guard, petrol expenses or vehicle is provided for official work. I have to travel in public transport to conduct my official duties."

Surekha mentioned that her village falls near International Border (IB) and at night it is security concern to travel alone. Explaining about the kind of work she has accomplished as DDC member, Surekha said that she has successfully constructed community hall, drains nearby a temple, tile work etc. "In Trayal panchayat I have got sanctioned a pull worth rupees 10 crores that was not earlier sanctioned. I struggled a lot for this basic amenity for my people for which we have meetings with general public and government officials. Sometimes I had to visit officials in late hours and I genuinely felt the need of security as a single unmarried woman."

Surekha shared that overall people have accepted her as their DDC member but still a small section of upper-caste male workers of our party feel jealous of my stature. "I can see it in their demeanor. They don't say anything negative to me but there is awkwardness that I sense." Surekha could not complete her education due to financial constraints but agree that education plays the most important role in present times. "I am not highly educated but I want females of my village to gain education and get good jobs." She acknowledges that through education and financial independence a woman can be empowered in real sense and she can take her decisions independently. To guarantee education for all the girl children under her area, DDC member Surekha is regularly monitoring the attendance of all teachers who work in government primary and middle school of her area and also takes regular feedback from the school administration, students as well as parents about the overall functioning of the schools.

Surekha has been attending DDC meetings regularly. She informed that DDC meetings could not be conducted sometimes because of the non-cooperation of few male DDC members. She asserts her viewpoint in the DDC meetings and when need arises she takes a firm stand also. Surekha is a

courageous and active DDC member. The decision to contest the election of DDC was her own supported by the political party and her father. She is satisfied with the cooperation and coordination of the administration as she tries her best to be fair with all the Panchayats under her jurisdiction.

People approach her with their personal problems which include cases of domestic violence, dowry related issues, land conflicts etc. Surekha has given special attention to water scarcity issue of Changiya Panchayat. "We have been demanding diversion of water in the canal of Changiya but there has been no action taken up so far. There is shortage of water in the Changiya panchayat as people who are practicing agriculture face a lot of issues." DDC member Surkeha has also given special focus to availability of ration through Public Distribution System, Ayushmann Health cards, Sillai yojana for her village inhabitants.

Surekha has accepted considerable change in her socio-economic status and people's perception towards her after she became DDC member. She accepted that there is more respect from community as well as government officials but mentioned that hike in salary of DDC members can actually enhance their economic independence and decision-making capacity.

Surekha has acknowledged that after formation of DDC democracy has actually gone deep into the grassroots. "Initially, the elections of Halqa Panchayats were not held for decades, women had no reservations in them. Halqa Panchayats became like a toothless tiger with no real powers and functions. However, with the coming up of DDC as third tier of Panchayats, the developmental work has begun in real sense."

Conclusion

The role performance of women DDC members has brought into reality the sharing of power at the grassroots is like associating with the Greek dream of direct democracy where each person is part of democratic process.

It was found in this study that women DDC members feel confident about their enhanced social status in society. They had good awareness about the developmental programmes and schemes in their respective areas. They also have enhanced awareness about the problems faced by women.

Women have opened up the possibility for politics to have not only few faces but a new quality. There is now a minority of women who are in politics because of their leadership qualities or feminist consciousness and visible changes in the articulation of ideas and leadership qualities exhibited by this minority have been noted in the different priorities and different values espoused by women in politics. Therefore, gendered governance here must be seen not only in larger presence of women in these institutions but also in

their effective meaningful participation, bringing women's concerns and perspectives in their working and to the extent of transforming.

The performance and participation of women DDC members was also good which is indicated by attending the DDC meetings regularly, raising of the issues independently and asserting their viewpoint on issues discussed in meetings. It was also found that the women DDC members were aware of their powers and responsibilities. They considered implementation of developmental work, and settling disputes as their primary responsibilities.

The study revealed that the women DDC members attempted to solve problems and made efforts to offer genuine solutions to the problems of people. Discussing matter in DDC meetings, mediations and meetings with government officials were the methods adopted by the female DDC members. They had generally cooperative and cordial relations with men DDC members.

As far as facing problems were concerned, women DDC members mentioned that the salary given was meagre to rely upon and the had no other facilities like vehicle, petrol expenses or guards at their disposal.

Final Suggestions

Based on the observation from field visits and the experiences shared by the women DDC members following measures are suggested for improvement of functioning of women DDC members:

- There should be provision of vehicle and security to DDC members as for commuting women representatives are highly dependent on their family members and this is a major constraint in discharging their public role. Most of the women representative do not own any vehicle and even if they have they don't ride it. It constraints their participation and decision-making in official functions of the local bodies.
- The administrative powers of DDC members should be enhanced so that public welfare activities and district development programmes are better coordinated and implemented.
- The salary of DDC members should be enhanced so that they feel motivated and economically empowered. Fostering gender-inclusive governance by integrating gender perspective while planning and budgeting exercises for DDC members.
- Mahila Sabhas should be strengthened with the active participation of all women representatives, SHG members and village women. Civil society organization can play a critical role in addressing the issue of marginalization of women representatives in local politics.
- The success stories of woman DDC members who have challenged

societal norms and helped progress the society should be celebrated via media.

- There should be regular orientation and refresher training for women DDC members with a focus on leadership skills, soft skills and digital literacy.

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Challenges and Pathways to Empowerment: A Study of Women District Development...

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Shevali Raina & Vishav Raksha

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